NUMB. CCXCI.

The SPECTATOR.

——Ubi plura nitent in carmine, non ego paucis
Offendor maculis, quas aut Incuria fudit,
Aut Humana parum cavit Natura—— Hor.

Saturday, February 2. 1712.

Have now conſider'd *Milton*'s *Paradiſe Loſt* under thoſe four great Heads of the Fable, the Characters, the Sentiments, and the Language; and have ſhewn that he excels, in general, under each of theſe Heads. I hope that I have made ſeveral Diſcoveries that may appear new, even to thoſe who are verſed in Critical Learning. Were I to chuſe my Readers, by whoſe Judgment I would ſtand or fall, they ſhould not be ſuch as are acquainted only with the *French* and *Italian* Critics, but alſo with the Ancient and Moderns who have written in either of the learned Languages. Above all, I would have them well verſed in the *Greek* and *Latin* Poets, without which a Man very often thinks that he underſtands a Critick, when in truth he does not comprehend his Meaning.

In Criticiſm, as in all other Sciences and Inſtitutions; one who brings with him any implicit Rules and Obſervations which he has made in his Reading of the Poets, will find his own Reflections methodized and explained, and perhaps ſeveral little Remarks that had paſſed in his Mind, prefected and improved in the Works of a good Critick; whereas one who has not theſe previous Lights, is very often a utter Stranger to what he reads, and apt to put a wrong Interpretation upon it.

I think it ſufficient, that a Man who ſets up for a Judge in Criticiſm, ſhould have peruſed the Authors above-mentioned, unleſs he has alſo a clear and Logical Head. Without this Talent he is perpetually puzzled and perplexed amidſt his own Blunders, miſtakes the Senſe of thoſe he would confute, or if he endeavours to think right, does not know how to communicate his Thoughts to another with Clearneſs and Perſpicuity. *Ariſtotle*, who was the beſt Critick, was alſo one of the beſt Logicians that ever appeared in the World.

Locke's Eſſay on Human Underſtanding would be thought a very odd Book for a Man to make himſelf Maſter of, who would get a Reputation by polite Writings; though at the ſame time it is very certain, an Author who has not learn'd the Art of diſtinguiſhing between Words and Things, and of cloathing his Thoughts, and ſetting them in proper Lights, whatever Notions he may have, will loſe himſelf in Confuſion and Obſcurity. I might further obſerve, that there is not a *Greek* or *Latin* Critick of Note ſhewn, even in the ſtile of his Criticiſms, to be a Maſter of all the Elegance and Delicacy of his Native Tongue.

Be that as it is, there is nothing more abſurd, than for a Man to ſet up for a Critick, without a good Inſight into all the Parts of Learning; whereas many of thoſe who have endeavoured to ſignalize themſelves by Works of this Nature among our *Engliſh* Writers, are not only defective in the abovementioned Particulars, but plainly diſcover by the Phraſes which they make uſe of, and by their confuſed way of thinking, that they are not acquainted with the moſt common and ordinary Syſtems of Arts and Sciences. A few general Rules extracted out of the *French* Authors, with a certain Cant of Words, has ſometimes ſet up an Illiterate heavy Writer for a moſt judicious and formidable Critick.

One great Mark, by which you may diſcover a Critick who has neither Taſte nor Learning, is this, that he ſeldom ventures to praiſe any Paſſage in an Author which has not been before received and applauded by the Publick, and that his Criticiſm turns wholly upon little Faults and Errors. This part of a Critick is ſo very eaſie to ſucceed in, that we find every ordinary Reader, upon the publiſhing of a new Poem, has Wit and Ill-nature enough to turn ſeveral Paſſages of it into Ridicule, and very often in the right Place. This Mr. *Dryden* has very agreeably remarked in thoſe two celebrated Lines,

Errors, like Straws, upon the Surface flow;
He who would ſearch for Pearls muſt dive below.

A true Critick ought to dwell rather upon Excellencies than Imperfections, to diſcover the concealed Beauties of a Writer, and communicate to the World ſuch things as are worth their Obſervation. The moſt exquiſite Words and fineſt Strokes of an Author are thoſe which very often appear the moſt doubtful and exceptionable, to a Man who wants a Reliſh for polite Learning; and they are theſe, which a ſower undiſtinguiſhing Critick generally attacks with the greateſt Violence. *Tully* obſerves, that it is very eaſie to brand or fix a Mark upon what he calls *Verbum ardens*, or, as it may be rendered into *Engliſh*, *a glowing bold Expreſſion*, and to turn it into Ridicule by a cold ill-natured Criticiſm. A little Wit is equally capable of expoſing a Beauty, and of aggravating a Fault; and though ſuch a Treatment of an Author naturally produces Indignation in the Mind of an underſtanding Reader, it has however its effect among the generality of thoſe whoſe Hands it falls into, the Rabble of Mankind being very apt to think that every thing which is laughed at with any mixture of Wit, is ridiculous in it ſelf.

Such

Such a Mirth as this, is always unseasonable in a Critick, as it rather prejudices the Reader than convinces him, and is capable of making a Beauty, as well as a Blemish, the Subject of Derision. A Man, who cannot write with Wit on a proper Subject, is dull and stupid, but one who shews it in an improper place, is as impertinent and absurd. Besides, a Man who has the Gift of Ridicule is very apt to find Fault with any thing that gives him an Opportunity of exerting his beloved Talent, and very often censures a Passage, not because there is any Fault in it, but because he can be merry upon it. Such kinds of Pleasantry are very unfair and disingenuous in Works of Criticism, in which the greatest Masters, both Ancient and Modern, have always appeared with a serious and instructive Air.

As I intend in my next Paper to shew the Defects in *Milton's Paradise Lost*, I thought fit to premise these few Particulars, to the End that the Reader may know I enter upon it, as on a very ungrateful Work, and that I shall just point at the Imperfections, without endeavouring to enflame them with Ridicule. I must also observe with *Longinus*, that the Productions of a great Genius, with many Lapses and Inadvertencies, are infinitely preferable to the Works of an inferior kind of Author, which are scrupulously exact and conformable to all the Rules of correct Writing.

I shall conclude my Paper with a Story out of *Boccalini*, which sufficiently shews us the Opinion that Judicious Author entertained of the sort of Criticks I have been here mentioning. A famous Critick, says he, having gathered together all the Faults of an Eminent Poet, made a Present of them to *Apollo*, who received them very graciously, and resolved to make the Author a suitable Return for the Trouble he had been at in collecting them. In order to this, he set before him a Sack of Wheat, as it had been just threshed out of the Sheaf. He then bid him pick out the Chaff from among the Corn, and lay it aside by it self. The Critick applied himself to the Task with great Industry and Pleasure, and after having made the due Separation, was presented by *Apollo* with the Chaff for his Pains.

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